

Chapter Eighteen - Birthday Treat

It is painful to me to see them battle. Only death will end my continual distraction. Yearning for solitude, peace, stillness and serenity is my main preoccupation. Each morning I take a quick look in a tiny mirror on the wall of my cell. First comes the decision whether or not to shave. My hair has gone completely, my skin is scarred with age spots and hangs in grey folds from my cheekbones. My eyes are sallow and insipid, tearful and milky like a decaying fish. What hair I have grows too long, and falls in wisps around my shoulders. I eat nothing in the morning; never have, never could. It is my ninetieth birthday. I have outlived them all. The year? 2035. Ninety years since Hiroshima. In the ether astral agents are still occasionally locating lost souls from that day. ‘My God, what have we done?’ The words of Captain Robert Lewis who dropped “*Little Boy*” from *Enola Gay* and instantly killed seventy thousand people. I would have been less than three months old.

The mental hospital is almost empty now. The only inmates of the sanatorium that remain here in 2035 are here by right; we choose to continue to reside in the rambling building that has been our home for so long that nowhere else would ever feel secure. The cell door is now unlocked at all times. And the ether is peaceful. Whenever I ascend (I ask again, might the sensation of ascent be, in reality, a *descent?*), as my God-intoxication takes over, and I begin again my daily measurement of the micro-fractional increments of progress made toward my beloved. The Vox-Box remains, a tatty phantom visible when—I suppose—I summon it. The ether is like a deserted sweep of virgin beach; I have it to myself.

This morning, as a birthday treat, I think I might wander to the theatre. Dressed in a white gown, tied at the waist; I shuffle down a long corridor in my loose fitting slippers. My eyes are bad and I can’t see the end of the brightly-lit hall. I know that the windows look over the River Thames at Syon Reach, I have come full circle. Just below the sanatorium on the river is the convent in which Gabriel and I had been born. Just above it, connected by this floating glass tube, is the old studio. Old Damoo is gone. We were true friends. I had been an aspiring Sufi, all aimless, wordy spiritual longing with little discipline. Damoo had been a curious mixture: a Muslim with a completely open mind.

I can remember some of our experiments together. We built a room full of tiny speakers through which sound emanated note by note like spatters of falling rain. A huge swing on which we suspended my entire electric guitar rig and swung it back and forth so that my playing sounded like the approach of a

rushing locomotive. The invention of our first 'Vox-Box', like the one Gabriel now used to try to talk to Josh, this was linked to the then primitive internet, and I once sat inside it - playing and talking to an audience I couldn't see - for a whole week. It turned out no one could see or hear me either. Long marble corridors that we used as echo chambers. Then as more powerful computers started to become accessible to us Damoo began to set up experiments for me that staggered the mind. Sadly, my mind was already staggered. My last lecture at the Royal College of Art, at which I was ridiculed, was around this time. I couldn't make myself clear. I didn't want to *warn* of an apocalypse, I wanted to *be* an apocalypse. Damoo and I experimented, and when I left him at BBZee he continued to work as a believer in the inevitability of a globe-girdling Grid that would soon transport matter as well as data. He gave the three children access to all our papers, all our experiments, all our ideas, and they brought fresh energy to them. My cell is linked to the old studio by dreams and starlight.

I soon reach the theatre where to this day the mock-gilded proscenium arch of *Tribby's* Piano still stands. The shallow staircase on the stage remains as well, at its head the garlanded dais, the mirror with its partly open door. I stand listening intently for any small sound from the rambunctious after show party-goers who once gathered on the other side of the mirror door, but I can hear nothing. A cleaner enters with a bucket and mop and after nodding politely to me, as though I am the rightful owner of some Great House, begins her work. I look at her with forgotten longing. She hums quietly as she works, her hair tied in a bunch at the back of her head; her legs strong, smooth and bare. It doesn't matter how close you get to God, how old you become, how collapsed your loins, a pretty girl can hijack an otherwise perfect day. With some irritation I take one more look around the studio and shuffle back to my cell, looking forward to leaving my decaying, impudent body behind. How can my cock still *dare* to rise at the sight of a well-formed calf?

'Once! Josh you know I am telling you the truth when
I say it was just once.'

Gabriel's voice rasps out. Now all there is to hear are echoes.

'I fucked a fan. Once. Angie got pregnant. But she
gave birth to a beautiful boy. She called him Hymie.
Leila saw him. Just once. Soon after she and I were
married. Even before I knew myself I was a father. It
broke her heart and broke us up. She went to you. And

then you both got into all that weird, strange,
sexual shit. Whips, chains, cellophane. Nothing like
we'd ever done together. It was dark Josh.'

And as I rise up to the serenity of my ether, I not only pass the echoes of Gabriel's transmission to Josh as they bounce to and fro from the invisible layered walls of the O-regions of parallel universes, but I also catch a glimpse of my young rock 'n' roll protégé as he languishes in the very same Glass Household to which I myself once retreated. As I soar upward I see a glimpse of Gabriel, in a frozen eternal moment of self-pity, slumped at the huge kitchen table, tears streaming down his face. I see Rastus Knight with whips and chains and Ruth Streeting screaming in pleasure. So Leila and Josh echoed them, and tried to pleasure each other through pain. Higher, higher I rise, and as I sweep through a blaze of white light that turns into a black spot – huge and microscopic at once – I heard Gabriel's voice begin to speak.

'Little Hymie was killed in a car crash. His mother
was driving. Out of her head on some coke I'd given
her.'

Gabriel's voice comes as ever from the multi-coloured Vox-Box. But today, in the ether, on the occasion of my birthday, there is an additional echo, a descant. But Gabriel's voice, his real voice as a young man, chases the echoes like a butterfly circling another in order to mate. 'Only one Hymie,' he sang.

'I looked down at the mirror'

The gruff voice of the old man continues.

'Scratched to fuck by razor blades. I couldn't see
any fucking door.'

I am used to years flying by. I swirl around indifferent to the frequent deaths of my contemporaries; able to ignore urchin boys sleeping in railway stations in India and Peru simply because I can see the entire panorama of their lifetimes – good or bad; I can see world events come and go – but it is only when I get back to the surface of the earth, and plant my feet firmly there, that I become aware that it is me who is mortal not my creations, or the subjects of my fantasies, or – indeed – those about whom I

read or write. Life is a peculiar device. There seems to be some undiscovered rule book that silently guides each of us through our absurd tripartite cycle of birth, panic, death. And yet science is always on the brink of an explanation. How strange to be a scientist. So certain that they are uncertain. They can tell you one thing for certain: they are on the brink. And divine messengers aren't much more help. They all say more or less the same thing: trust God. But as Josh saw when his life first began to unravel when he was still a boy, and voices filled his head at every moment of the day, why should we trust God? Who is he? The message God sends (via his divine messenger chappies) is usually that we should trust him because life will take its course in any case, whatever we do, feel or think, so why fret? My own guru Balloo said 'Don't worry be happy'. Or did he borrow the phrase from a greetings card, a pop song or – indeed – did he paraphrase a superior messenger?

We are all in this together. When an old friend dies, whom I haven't seen for far too long, at first I feel nothing but empathy. Then I remember their little quirks, their ability to draw from me through their eccentricities that spark of love that lit up my sky. I can soar every day into that remembered sky. And for me, lucky enough to be unconfined by time and space, and – thus – able to travel, albeit briefly, independently of the silly rules of so-called life, there is again that familiar cycle of birth, panic, death. Or, as I am a devout follower of Balloo, the cycle of *three* might be resequenced thus: birth, serene acceptance of our meaninglessness, death. I am cynical now. Do I desire to look down at all of God's creations? Or do I want to look down on Creation's God?

Gabriel, insistent in his Vox-Box up in my ether, patient and eternal, has transmitted to his old friend without ceasing for at least three hours. I know only that the old fellow, who was once my protégé, is often an obstruction - a distraction to my astral travel. I also have a sudden and strange feeling he must be dead. It feels stupid really. Gabriel! Are you dead?

'I found a new interest on the internet. Her name had attracted me at first: Victoria. Wasn't this one of our first Method subscribers?'

Old man Gabriel holds up a photograph to the Vox-Box camera. A pretty, young woman lays back on her bed facing the camera.

'She enticed me. She looked a bit like Leila. I was vulnerable. I was drunk. I was hooked.'

‘My name is Victoria. I think you are a genius. You are one of the sexiest men on the planet. You’re really old, but that doesn’t worry me.’

Gabriel’s computer had selected a curiously inanimate voice for such an erotic messenger.

‘She and I began to communicate regularly. She said she wanted to be a singer, a star, could I help her? I began to lecture her about the arts, music, the process of creating celebrity. Shut away as I was, drinking, isolated, her attention engaged me. I had one fan, and she was all I wanted or needed. I offered Victoria one of the pivotal songs from the *Method*. It was based on her own musical portrait. She said she would record it.’

Let’s sweep past the headlines.

‘Macabre hit for Gabriel Pirelli with *Only One Hymie*.’

‘Grid boss Leila Irani claims *Method* concert will go ahead – with or without the grieving Pirelli.’

‘Josh Cass hopes for Glass reunion in New York for Christmas.’

‘In Ray High’s big glass house in the country I thought about my life. The once beautiful music I heard started to change; it became horrifying. Angie didn’t stay after little Hymie died. I longed for sex, female company, male company, but I remained alone. I began to take refuge in emailing, when I would occasionally talk to you my old friend. Occasionally Leila....’

‘You won’t let us use your music – for the *Method*?’

‘I hate what you want to do with it. It’s not art. Just business now.’

‘Everything’s *business*. The *Method* will radically transform anyone who gets involved – and that transformation will be spiritual. Josh would benefit. He’s broke. What the fuck is wrong with you?’

‘I want to keep my head down.’

He had wanted to say that his son was dead, didn’t she understand? But he couldn’t bring himself to have to face her answer, to hear her sneer, and call his heart by-passed lover a slag.

‘*Only one Hymie The Method*. Josh wrote most of the words. You don’t have sole ownership. In any case it’s a moral issue’

‘I control the Grand Rights to *The Method* and to *Trilby’s Piano*. I’m sorry, it was me that registered both pieces as self-contained dramatic works – you were too busy becoming Miss Randolph Hearst to notice.’

‘I’m your wife. I trusted you.’