

Chapter Nineteen - Men Called Uncle

Gabriel loved his house. My house. Maybe he was unaware of the excellent vibration of the precise location on the river on which I had built it; or was he too drunk to care? But my house saved his life. In a floating kitchen, that I built mischievously right into the boughs of a huge weeping willow, he sat for hours watching the sunlight reflecting on the turbulent water foaming over the weir. He sat with his small-bodied guitar, a bottle of cognac alongside a blank pad of paper and a cheap memo-recorder, and played and sang his way through the days.

He tried to read. Choosing difficult, loosely-locked books like *Remembrance of Things Past*, or the short stories of Maupassant. As a result he often didn't read for long, or he transferred to easier stuff: late William Golding or even Trollope. Cocaine if he had any was a part of his routine, but when it ran out he did not hurry to London to replenish it. He just drank less cognac. In his romantic reveries he imagined he was reliving my life; isn't that rich? He was trying to relive a life I myself could not complete. Indeed, trying to finish what I had started had obsessed all three of the band. Gabriel concentrated on the decadence.

More precisely, I lost music quite early in my life simply because I had damaged my hearing so badly my head constantly whined at me. But in one sense Gabriel and me were alike: booze ameliorated the sounds in our head. Where Josh had medication designed expressly to settle his schizophrenic tendencies, Gabriel had cognac to settle the challenging symphonic cacophony that constantly thundered in his head.

On such an Autumn day in 2002 did Josh come to visit his old band-mate. Gabriel, seeing a car proceeding slowly through his garden, almost decided not to open the door. He hung from the neck of his cognac bottle as though clinging to a spar on a leaning ship. But when the bell rang, he found himself eager to speak to someone. And, it must be said, the hopeful thought had flitted errantly through his mind that perhaps Victoria had sought him out. It was then, with a mixture of disappointment and resignation that he found Josh at his door, waving his car and chauffeur away.

The two men skirted each other nervously, Josh declining a drink in the middle of the day. He was anxious, on the verge of anger and shaking slightly.

‘I’ve run out of money,’ he said flatly. ‘Leila won’t help me any more. She told me I must confront you. I feel fucked over. You must let us do the *Method*. You must. OK – you wrote the music, but I’ve written the poetry behind everything the band have ever done. And the whole *Method* thing was originally Leila’s idea.’

Gabriel felt himself heat up, tears filled his eyes and he wanted to throw the bottle at Josh. He heard his own voice as if through a layer of veils.

‘Let me think about it.’

‘He has had a relationship with this girl via the Internet,’ Leila spoke briskly to a reporter outside her office. ‘Victoria. She was a child.’

‘She was seventeen,’ corrected the reporter.

‘In the photo she was *under* sixteen.’

Thus were events unfolding. The girl’s age reported by the press would reduce by a year at every mention. A story heard a thousand times before. Gabriel may have taken leave of his senses when he fell in love with Victoria. But he had taken leave of his life when he fell out of love with his wife.

Later :

‘Victoria is *Leila’s* creation,’ said Josh on the phone. ‘Almost a virtual girl. Leila’s programmes on the Grid are full of characters like Victoria. Don’t you check it out?’

‘I don’t. What about Victoria, the girl in the first *Method* experiment back at BBZee?’

‘Gabriel, you’re losing track of time. She’d be much older by now than the girl you’re communicating with. There’s always been a real Victoria, Leila probably knows exactly where she is too. But the one in the photo is just some girl Leila has found. Leila was

hooking you.’

‘Jesus. This is Ray High’s story all over again.’

‘If she doesn’t tell the truth, you’ll never be able to show your face in public again. Fight back. Let me be the one to stage the *Method* concert. Let real people come. I can pirate my way into Leila’s network. I can call people to the concert using the Grid. This event won’t be a corporate flotation stunt – it will be a rebellion; an act of overthrowal.’

I drift slowly along the pure white beach, the water it abuts is a brilliant blue. In the distance, two horses are splashing at the water’s edge; the only disturbance. ‘Damned O-regions,’ I think. This is where stories can repeat time after time. Ray High and Ruth. Gabriel and Leila.

For somewhere in those regions, Elvis is still alive. Damoo as Elvis impersonator is still active as well. Old friends. Interruption. Biography interrupted. What is it I had meant to do? Who is it I had longed to touch?

I remember a woman plunging my head under the bath-water, again and again. I had only been five years old, a little more perhaps. A strange motorcyclist lived in my house, and never removed his helmet or goggles when he came through the corridor. Coming across him by accident was like meeting Darth Vader. But I knew this great giant was my protector. He was nearby. I could call him, surely he would hear?

The woman entertained many unfamiliar men I had had to call ‘Uncle’. In an O-region oscillating directly by my head I know – in an explosive, bombastic instant of revelation – that one of these men had persuaded the woman to let him.....

In the neighbouring O-region, safe up in the ether now, I can see now what happened to me then. Gabriel and I are brothers in survival. I knew nothing of all this until I got here, afloat. I see a bathtub, a child, an angry woman, a man watching, all forgotten until I came here and saw myself in my own timelessly rerun journey.

From my position in the ether, even by the beach with its gentle but noisy surf, I can hear the radio

transmissions over space and time. Whether it is old man Gabriel crashing into my repose with his reminiscences, or the prattlings of related news from the babbling radio jocks of the eighties.

‘Leila Irani revealed this week that Victoria’s monster hit was penned for her by the reclusive Gabriel Pirelli – Irani’s estranged husband. Pirelli and Victoria had “met” on the Internet. Pirelli was unavailable for comment.’

In my little cell, Oh! For heaven’s sake, let’s call me by my given name. I now know who I am. Or - more properly - who I was. I was Ray. Stage name Ray High. Full name Ray Highsmith, trapped, deceived, exposed and driven to insanity by the wiles of my manager Rastus Knight and Ruth Streeting, the acerbic, bitter journalist who dragged me, a broken rock star, briefly back to fame in an elegant and exotic plot in the early eighties. Already fractured by tragedy, I was further upended by a photograph of a young woman in a seductive pose. So Leila really had had a model for her subterfuge. And Gabriel was beginning now to topple in a similar way. I had been able to save my famous face only by returning to the stage; so it seemed Gabriel there too faced echoes. Facing faces. Face the faces that we meet .

I look at my fingernails. Broken, bitten. Ahead, I pray in this *asylum* – let us pretend no longer it is anything more or less – this last bastion of ‘locked-down’ protection for the criminally insane, I will one day, far in the future, sleep a peaceful sleep. Before me on my desk, in a neat small pile, the old Holborn tins rearranged a little to make a fence-like frame, is a playscript. It was just forced under my door, sheet by sheet, until a fan of paper covered the floor. I nervously, carefully, gathered up the sheets and arranged them in page order. I sit with the manuscript before me, and spread my palms. I take up the first sheet and hold it up to the light from the angle lamp on my table. There are printed words, but covering the entire first sheet are spidery, curling, spiralling, hand-written additions. Large, grand titles are underlined and elaborately decorated as though by someone listening eternally to the most boring lecture – timeless embellishment; the activity of the distracted mind; an outsider.

On the title sheet, in the very centre, I can just make out the words: ‘Sister, Slaying’. This title has been ornately scribbled over, but is still readable. Below it is the word ‘Gridlife’ – again crossed out, and replaced nearby by ‘Ray High and the Gridlife Chronicles’. That too is smudged and defaced, and more and more alternative titles worm their spiralling way over this first page until hardly a square millimetre is clear. ‘Gridlife, a world where music, once banned, was safely buried, awaiting rediscovery.’ Further down is another attempt to reconfigure the sheet; a small patch of paper has been

gummed over the scribble, and – neatly once – is inscribed ‘Trilby’s Piano’. I slowly pass my fingers over the myriad of tangled words. I remember now that some are words I myself invented. Others I do not recognise. Behind me I hear a gentle hiss as a single sheet follows the others. It is a note.

‘Sir, we must do the play. Gabriel sent a message from the other side, all will be well if we do the play. Read this and let me know what you think. I’m sorry so much has been borrowed from you over the years, but you will understand how that works. Please, help me do the play. Josh (next door!)’