

Chapter Twenty-one - A Concert for New York

The golden proscenium rises through the insubstantial fabric of the ether like a lost temple rising from the ocean floor. Restored to glory, hugely amplified, it rises slowly and steadily without pause for several minutes. Where once had been mere vines and creepers sprayed with gold, there is now the most effulgent gilded decoration; living angels, cherubs, sirens, mermaids – their breasts swollen, their tails engorged with eggs – hanging from the lavishly decorated pillars. They writhe and wave and smile with valediction like soldiers welcome home from battle. The arch itself is dripping with gold, platinum and bejewelled leaves. In the middle, a triumphant eagle, with the torso and body of an Amazonian woman, crashes its enormous wings, sending a spray of glittering precious stones, and sweet smelling liquid perfume, down onto the grey surface of the ethereal beach below.

I gaze astounded as my private beach, my precious solitude is breached from below by this monstrosity. The Vox-Box has been bad enough. But this! As my eyes clear, I see that the staircase, at BBZee for *Trilby's Piano*, so modest – five steps or less – now seems to rise endlessly to the heavens. The mirror at its head, stretches right up into the troposphere where billions of angelic souls are beginning to muster in the folds of bosom-like clouds illuminated by irrational, criss-crossing shafts of sunlight falling from every angle as though from a solar system with more than one primary star.

For the first time ever, here in the ether, I feel anxiety. It builds in me as music begins to fill the air: an overture. A trillion voices begin to breathe, to chant, to run through scales. Orchestras begin to tune up. Percussionists begin to tap the edges of their drums and xylophones. I drop suddenly and, without warning, into my cell. Breathless, frightened, sweating, I look for the lunch that could have triggered my plunge down to the crust. I can smell fast food. But it is still quite early in the morning. I hear a great bustle outside my cell door, which stands ajar. I gingerly open it enough so that I can see what is going on in the corridor. Nurses, doctors, patients and their families are all moving back and forth excitedly, busily. Some are carrying chairs, some musical instruments, most are simply moving towards the theatre.

I shut the door and lean against it, a futile act. I cannot stop what is happening. I bang on the wall.

‘Josh, Josh, what’s happening?’

There is no reply. I do not need a reply. On my little desk lays the manuscript Josh delivered some months ago. The inmates of our sanatorium are going to perform Josh's play. Based on my play. Based on a dream, or a nightmare. I slump to my only chair and try to remember my part in all of this. Like some kind of neoteric Marat/Sade have I conspired with Josh to stage the play? And what is going on up in the ether? Is this madhouse event more than it at first appears? And what has in fact happened? I must go out into the corridor, and brave the thronging babble, and walk to the theatre. What have I done?

You will recall on previous *recces* I swooped along the river, and quite quickly happened on the convent in which both Gabriel and myself were born. The studio building Damoo and I had later inaugurated as our creative base, was separated from the convent by a University Campus. But now, in 2035 I look again, and things—it seems—have changed. The University is gone. Its sweeping acres of lawn are cluttered with prim, crammed new roads of bijou houses. There are several massive blocks of apartments. Along one part of the river's edge is a tube-like corridor from the convent, now a sanatorium, to the studios, now a theatre. In some give-and-take of the developer's art of manipulating local planning committees, they have traded the profit of riverside residential housing against the doubtful social amenity of a nut-house linked by a birth-canal tube to an old recording studio. I know now, thanks to the consistent disturbances to the chronology here by interruptions of my already interrupted autobiography, that this hospital, this studio, is where this old rock star will grow old and die – and not a moment too soon: the developers made a commitment to maintain the sanatorium and its theatre until the last inmate dies. A promise they will subsequently come to regret.

There is no requirement for fantasy, mystery, imagination, religion, spiritualism here. These aspects of the story emerge now simply because one of the characters—me, Ray High, ether-traveling nutter—has put his head, so to speak, through the roof. Let me observe this and describe what I see. Let's have no truck with the deceit and moral dereliction of 'reincarnation'. Let's hold no store for the predictions of 'mediums' or 'clairvoyants', even less for so-called self-appointed and self-promoted 'karmic-teachers' who claim to see the past, present and future of our passengers. Why should we? You have, with me, travelled timeless lands and know how little what happens *there* impinges on what happens *here*. How could it? If the construction of the natural world was meant to allow the incorporation of reflected parallel worlds, or timeless jumps ahead and behind, or remembrances of past lives, then surely we would be aware of all this? We can decide for ourselves what is real here, and what is nonsense, or – at best – poetry. The great Sufi mystic-poet Rumi wrote, a ruthless translation from the ancient Persian

here:

Rock, plant, animal; to each I have died

....and become more.

When have I become less by dying?

Now I am man.

When I die I will soar with angels.

What I shall become

....you can't imagine[\[1\]](#).

.So it seems one cannot entirely trust a poet either, even one as spiritually perfect as Rumi, to avoid messing with the 'angels' with whom I am now so familiar. However, what is clear is that Rumi, as my guru Bollo also taught, believed his *consciousness* had evolved from rock to man. I am party now to Josh's terrible dilemma; if God speaks why does He never speak of what has already been spoken? All the trouble in the world, or most of it that is serious, can be traced today to a jealous *monotheistic* God. It confounds me that God, whenever he gets a direct line via a messenger to the human race, insists on his One-ness. I know that God is as infinitely divided as He is infinitely complete and universally autonomous. What does God mean when He tells me to have no other Gods but Him? Are there others to have? Do I have a choice in this crucial matter? I can select Greek Gods over their roman or even Egyptian counterparts, but they are the same Gods. If I select Jahveh, why does he seem to me to be so pissed off at those who select Allah? And vice-versa. Why is it *my* job, not His, to deal with detractors? My head is through the roof and I see something beyond human understanding.

What was happening on Manhattan had happened before, and been far worse. From the first suicide bomber who killed Josh's father, the significances and inconsequentialities of religious conflict, family denial, and a children's play, I find myself circling a burning city. And as plumes of smoke rise, here and there, I see the great inflatable black angel-dragon hanging over Central Park. The play on that side of the Atlantic is about to begin. As the huge blimp, sponsored as ever by Goodyear, veers gently against its six restraining cables, the great concert apparently begins. Children, hanging from the dark rubber wings flapping gently in the wind, sometimes obscured by planes of smoke, laugh, scream and drop to the ground. Flying, some of them. Simply plummeting, others. Is this real, or sophisticated circus trickery? Clearly something I am seeing is not quite right.

Gabriel points at the Golden Arched Proscenium thrusting up into the clouds and beyond, the staircase

carrying pilgrim souls to the pinnacle, to the mirror door.

The gigantic proscenium that Gabriel has imagined in his terrible, tortured delirium is in place, towering up into the heavens. Its more modest counterpart, its mortal model, is still in place in the sanatorium theatre – once BBZee studios – where it has remained relatively untouched ever since Damoo and I had conditionally bequeathed the studio tenure to the sanatorium, and the sanatorium conditionally bequeathed it on to the developers. A show is going to go on, two shows at once, that much is becoming clear. But where and when, in what plane, what time, what year?

Josh was suddenly by Gabriel's side, a firm hand on his arm. Gabriel turned and saw the face of his old friend. His head fell and he half collapsed into Josh's arms. In the street were dozens of sirens.

'John Lennon. Did I do it? I heard voices telling me to do it.'

'That was a long time ago. You were here in town, in this very room, when it happened. You know, in the past I've heard voices telling me to kill everyone from John F. Kennedy to Martin Luther King.'

'But they're already dead?'

'Of course, they were already dead'.

'Uh,' Gabriel shook his head. 'I'm losing track. I could have killed myself.'

Josh gently sat Gabriel back down onto the bed. He took a moment to breathe, but held tightly onto his friend's wrists. There would be no suicide.

'It could be worse.'

'Huh?'

'Someone has set off bombs around the city, it's mayhem out there.'

They sat together on the bed for what seemed an age. Gabriel was still naked and Josh brought him a fluffy white gown from the bathroom. It was too short, but he pulled it around himself. Gabriel looked

at Josh's grim, gently smiling face. How had they come to reverse roles like this? Josh was the one who heard voices. He was the mad one. He looked calm, handsome, serene.

'I've stopped taking my medication,' he said. 'Seems like you might need it now.'

And then suddenly Leila was there, breathing hard. Her breasts swelling under a tight low cut blouse inside a dark business suit. Tears streaked her face incongruously.

'Thank God you're both safe.'

The elevator had been switched off. She'd walked up the forty odd flights.

Gabriel looked at his wife. All he saw was her massive bosom. She was bigger. It was bound to happen.

'I came to try to stop you,' she said, slumping into a hard chair. 'Now I believe it must go on. We must do this together.'

I see the essential scene changes as though in a movie. There is no inessential padding. I whip-pan, cut, track, wipe and ripple-dissolve from place to place. So, whether Josh or Leila brought Victoria to New York to sing the massive hit that Gabriel had written for her before a crowd of hundreds of thousands, themselves watched by an audience out on the Grid that may have numbered billions; whether any concert, any play, any mere entertainment mattered at all when burned and torn bodies were still being hauled from wrecked restaurants, buses, schools and even hospitals; this is, hopefully, one of the last questions I ask. For as the concert takes place, it is clear that the gigantic golden proscenium rises from its base in Central Park up and beyond the troposphere, up into the ether. It floats as a phantom, but visible to everyone who can hear the music, who can see the multitudes climbing the staircase to the other side, to what lays beyond. And Leila, Josh and even Gabriel—once he sobered up—decided then that after such a tragedy their own small troubles were insignificant. They would do the concert for New York itself, for the victims. Victims. Real victims.