

Chapter Twenty-two - The Colegno

In a modest cell in a sanatorium for the mentally ill in Isleworth by the Thames, a beautiful Muslim woman sits with a balding, grey-haired patient.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ he says, as she puts her hand on his. ‘Ray High, the guy who did the lecture on the videotape ...’

‘*“I believe there is a door,”* that guy?’

‘I found him,’ he says. And then, excitedly he shares the news. ‘He can hear Gabriels’ voice too - the Godfather voice - he can hear it too.’

‘I spoke to reporters in New York that night.’

Gabriel’s warm, lovingly precise voice begins just once more to float over the ethereal beach where I kick stones into the sea and watch distant horse riders throwing up spray a mile off.

‘I told them I heard music. All the time. When I was a kid. I don’t know how it happened. My parents were musicians. There was music everywhere when I was young. Before I was born. Maybe I started hearing it in my mother’s womb. I doubt if it was good music. But what is ‘good’ music? Maybe I heard a brass band playing, or a church service, a ride in a truck or an airplane, droning for hours, the sound of the wind, the thunder of bombs dropping. My parents played in Israel you know. They pulled out bodies. My mother fell downstairs at a wild party on Remembrance Day in 1962. I was nearly lost that night, then I was born. You know we used to believe - Glass Household - that we would become like Gods.’

‘The music at the concert in Central Park was exciting, powerful, unpredictable and, utterly

chaotic. The whole event seemed to me like a dream in any case, I was still detoxing I suppose. Every musical fragment was preceded by the announcement of a name, the name of the subject - the 'sitter'. Their face appeared on screen, a spotlight picked them out in the 100,000 audience assembled. A telephoto lens and a shotgun mike eavesdropped as they first heard their musical portrait. New names and faces were mixed on the massive screen and over the public address system. Individual portraits were combined and interleaved, both contrapuntally and like fugues and canons. The climax was a dense noise. Moving slowly from music, climatic and monumental, to the fractal sounds of moving air and water - finally to the roar of oceans - the gentle sound of waves began, fading finally to the imperceptible breath-like hiss and, ultimately, the silence of deep space.'

'It was a great night for us wasn't it Josh? All the great bands played for us. Leila assembled most of the best music programmers in the world at the time. Ray High came, they allowed him to come because it was for charity, and he had two minders from the sanatorium. He gave his "I believe" speech. He thought the world had forgotten him. It felt like a great reciprocal honour. The concert was a monumental success. The Method worked. Hearing their own special tailor-made music enchanted millions of people jacked into the concert from the Grid - all around the world. Millions who didn't get there in the flesh felt as though they were really there.'

'At the end, I ran on stage, I could hardly contain

myself. Ray High was beside me, shaky and delicate. Victoria had sung my song, Leila held my arm to the sky. "We've survived!" I was shouting. "We're free. The Method has set us free." Embarrassing. Forgive me Josh. I was excited. In that moment, as I look back, I remember everything suddenly changing around me. Under me. It was as though I too was experiencing life in some virtual world that could transform fantasy into reality. The music and the applause ceased. For a moment there was silence. All I could hear was the gentle buzz of a small theatre audience. Then we all began to sing ONLY ONE HYMIE. It was strange. It felt small, and out of perspective. But we didn't stop until we'd sung the entire song.'

'That's how I remember it Josh.'

That's how it is. Victoria, Leila, Josh and myself are all on the stage in Central Park as Gabriel takes his bow. The song has, as always, been beautiful. Such a simple, silly song in a way. A kind of Sondheim parody, all passionate show-tune lyricism, full of smart and witty twists, set against beautifully, classically structured accompaniment. Complex. No! *simple*. Elegant.

It sounded lovely too in the little theatre by the river in Isleworth. About one hundred of us watched Josh's play, and—as the stage darkens—I can almost see, superimposed on our modest event, the huge, clamorous crowds at the great festival that is happening simultaneously up in the ether that now stretches from India across Europe and the Atlantic to New York, the new city of absolution. In the darkened backdrop I can see the simulated starlight of a hundred thousand cigarette lighters, held up to the night. Flash cameras blink futilely beyond reach in the distance. The characters in our story face us, and take our applause, and ~~unwittingly~~ that from the heavens.

'I felt the bullet hit me.'

Gabriel's voice wafts across the ether, from another time, another place.

'You were running towards me. The New York skyline

began to blaze in my mind. There was a scuffle on stage. You were restrained by some security men and brought to the ground. You were holding a gun you'd grabbed from a cop. As I began to die I heard again that most wonderful music I'd heard before. Leila ran to me, and to you. Victoria turned drama into melodrama. She shouted over the huge public address system: "If Gabriel dies, the audience will die too: they're all connected, united over the Grid, by the art, by the music. Most of them have chosen to be connected to Gabriel. His heart is their heart. Gabriel! You can't die, you'll take them with you...." '

In the little theatre, the audience has become very quiet. There was silence too in Central Park. Silence in the heavens above the park; silence, for once, in the ranks of disembodied beings afloat between sky and soil. They had all suspended disbelief you see. What a wonderful, generous gift that is. Audience to artist. All the faces in the mortal audiences looked troubled, expectant, hopeful. Maybe they wondered if they really would travel with Gabriel to death? We by the river Thames certainly wondered what might be happening outside the little theatre itself. If there really was a massive global audience out there, jacked into Gabriel via the Grid, would they all die with him too? Were they terrified of being dragged with him to the other side? To what they believed must be some kind of darkness? Was our little audience by the river watching some kind of massive revelation, genocide sparked by a single murder on the opposite side of an ocean?' On the stage Gabriel appears to be dying a genuinely *operatic* death.

'I began to hear again the music I had heard in my childhood, the most perfectly beautiful celestial music. It was heavenly, soaring, the most incredible sound I would ever hear. And the audience could hear it too, at last. We could all hear it.'

Above the little stage, in the air above Gabriel's body, the small lights twinkling like stardust become audible, an orchestral sound, delicate; like violinists tapping their strings with the backs of their

precious bows. *Colegno*.

'I floated above my body, surrounded by millions of angels singing. Some of them were your angels Josh, and were reciting the most beautiful words; a meaningless language like the cut-ups of the '50s Beat Poets, but served up with the rhythmic elegance of Milton, Borges, Melville. A pair of huge white wings filled the air, Leila's childhood wings grown large, and from under them hung a million cherub children, laughing and singing, crying. This was like my waking nightmare the evening the bombs went off in New York – that girl, the pigeons – but the effect was beautiful. Then the music intensified and that awful, remembered screaming began again. I was filled with the most terrifying nauseous fear: I was going to die.'

'I can't really talk about this any more. I have to go now Josh. I won't come back again. It's been great to speak to you. But we're getting very near the time when this story catches up with the present. I have to go and take my part on the stage with everyone else now. Back over there....'

Gabriel peeps from the Vox-Box up in my ether and waves vaguely behind him.

'....You do realise now it was not your fault? It is only an illusion after all. But you don't know that, not yet. How could you? It's time for me to leave the stage Josh. That time. God, we artists really hate that time don't we?'

Up in my ether the stars begin to dim, the ocean darkens. As ever I straddle two worlds, and from my ethereal world I can see two events happening at once, but they seem to be converging rapidly. Actors

and musicians are bowing on stage at a massive event in New York, and yet some of the very same players are on stage taking applause in the little theatre in London. In all this confusion and complexity the Vox-Box appears again, I see moonlight, gentle rays filling in the harsh illuminations of the two stages. Gabriel speaks again.

'A little longer perhaps? Has time caught up at last? Not quite. Back on that big stage. Dying. I fade, and fall into a death reverie. Just like in Trilby's Piano, a staircase appears. But oh my, this is bigger, so much bigger - at least to me. At the distant head of a hundred thousand steps everyone seems to be gathered. Jahveh, Job, Satan dressed as Elvis, Aunt Trilby, Hymie, Myrna, Phil, Dotty, Donnie and Connie, they are all there. Ray High, his father the conjuror with his ailing rabbit, Silverman, Damoo, the rapists from the night club. The girl from the hotel who stole my money is there. Leila's Sophia was there too, not sure whether to be Jewish or Muslim, straight from the Psalms. And there is my lost son. Little Hymie, and his nutty, gorgeous, coke-head, heart-by-passed mother Angie. He holds out his arms to me. They all do. Behind them up there is a huge mirror, just as Ray High had predicted. You, the audience - with your lighters and flash-cameras - you are the ones reflected in this giant mirror. In the giant mirror is a small door, an almost hidden door. It is slightly ajar.'

I have been identified now, sitting in an audience, watching a play that is taking place in a sanatorium. The audience has been most gracious to suspend disbelief so generously. I can still see the 'angels' at their positions around the great proscenium, they decorate and embellish, they elaborate and exalt. They will always attempt to make wondrous what is otherwise quite ordinary. Ah! Such music in the air and ether as they fly up to take their positions. A tumultuous, rising, symphony. Every song of every heart that ever has lived is being played at once. Then, through the din, we all of us allow our eyes to

glisten a little as *Only One Hymie* rings out again. The songs of the childhood of our three, wondrous, special children ring out as Leila and Josh help Gabriel to the foot of the staircase. *Bubbles. Only one Hymie. S.O.S. We are breathing out, and breathing in.....*

'You and Leila helped me to my feet. I was bleeding pretty badly. But I began, shakily to ascend, getting stronger with every step. I reached the top and held my little son once again. I am afraid Josh. This is the present. This is now.'

And at the precise moment of this 'now', the last words Gabriel transmitted to Josh from the Vox-Box ring out triumphantly over time, history and the inconsequence of his existence.

'I am walking through the mirror door.'