

## Chapter 2 - In The Ether

Winter. 2035. Gabriel walks into the ether of my meditation. He has been a number of times before, but it has been hard for me to tune into precisely what is happening to me lately. I feel myself to be, to exist, but I'm not always quite sure who or what I am. I know I have been someone, lived somewhere and known many people, but at such moments I feel disembodied. I am quite rational; I can remember some strands of basic Quantum Theory, and of the Sufic mysticism I had learned that complemented it. Indeed, as Gabriel appears, he seems an almost mystical figure. Why has he come? Perhaps he hasn't come to visit me. Has he come to see someone else?

*In the ether  
I hang suspended  
I wait for you  
And I know you're near  
In this high heaven  
My world's upended  
I feel no passion  
I feel no fear  
I'm dizzy with love  
But you never appear  
In the gloom of this room  
Of this cell down here*

Then my misty reality folds in. At moments like this my mind functions like a Black Hole. All the energy begins to swirl down into a distant vortex, and I begin to be carried. A loud bang interrupts the business, and anyone normal would return to full consciousness. But I no longer enjoy – I once would have said 'suffered' – normal consciousness. I am intoxicated. Not by booze or drugs but by a feeling of being close to God.

*I know this place  
Isn't truly real  
And that like my love  
It expands and sprays  
The light will find me*

*Will bend toward me  
Yet I'm marooned  
In a billion days  
I'm drunk with you  
And I can't explain  
Who or where I am  
Or how I'm in pain*

*Rocking and rocking me  
Rhythm is shocking me  
Just like a child in your fist  
You are knocking me  
Rocking and rocking  
Autistic, caged I am  
Rocking and rocking  
And rocking enraged I am....  
Drunk with you*

I am so dizzy most of the time I have forgotten my own idea of God. I have forgotten God's many names; indeed, for the moment, I have forgotten my own name. Is it High, Spin, Ray? They float in and out. Good names.

On this occasion, as Gabriel comes, and I am being carried precipitously at the edge of the vortex, I resist snapping out of my reverie. But there is another loud bang. Hunger. I feel hunger. Food. It is time to eat. I can smell something, perhaps some green leaves? A hint of anchovy? But if I eat now I will not be able to see Gabriel. And, in a sudden revelation, I realise that I have waited for Gabriel—or someone like him—for a very long time. So I continue to swirl in the intoxication of God's loving presence like an insecure child running around and around its parent. I see an object in my foggy imagination that might be taken to be a quick-photo booth of the kind seen in railway stations. It looks like one of those booths people used to go into in the '80s years of trendy TV feedback from the masses, to give their personal views. Did we once call it a *Vox Box*? I can't remember. Right now, I have no clear memories of anything at all, but I have a strong sense of a life once rooted – a mortal life – that began with the most terrible explosion somewhere.

*In the ether  
I wait for you  
Hanging in this mist  
That I know's unreal  
There is nothing there  
There's no you, no me  
Even though it's crazy  
I still appeal  
This is heavenly hell  
I appear insane  
I have no idea  
Who there is to blame.....*

Gabriel enters the box and pulls the green curtain over the doorway.

'Hey Josh' .

I hear a gruff, godfatherly voice.

'It's me. Gabriel. I just came over to speak to you. From over there....'

I wonder is my own name Josh? I feel my heart again, pumping. So I have a heart. I am still alive. I am, whatever seems to surround me, mortal. Now I remember: of course I am not Josh. Josh and Gabriel were two boys, two young fellows I once knew. *Young* Josh was *young* Gabriel's friend. So Gabriel is speaking to Josh. But he doesn't sound exactly young. He sounds old. Not as old as me, but old enough. I have waited for what seems like an eternity for someone to come to me and explain everything, and now that he has come, he is speaking to someone else.

I watch as inside the Vox-Box Gabriel makes himself comfortable. I peek inside. He is a good-looking, craggy man who does everything tortuously slowly. Here is a man who understands the plentiful nature of time. His hair is grey and, for a man in his sixties, thick. His skin is tanned, and, in the colourful Caribbean skullcap he has perhaps taken to in his old age, he has the look of an eccentric artist. His speaking voice, even slower and more deliberate than his movements, is generous, kind and comforting. He emphasises every word as though it is sublimely precious. If he were an actor he would

be accused of milking his lines.

‘Josh.’

Gabriel gestures behind him, pulling for a moment at the blackout curtain.

‘I came from over there.’

A shaft of bright and multicoloured light fills the inside of the Vox-Box for a moment, then Gabriel lets the curtain fall.

‘Do you remember?’

Gabriel leans on his forearms and gazes intently into the Vox-Box camera. He seems to be concentrating, focusing, trying to cross an immense divide between himself and Josh. But he is, after all, merely transmitting; his transmission will either arrive at its target destination or it will end up in the ether. My ether. I remember that physicists and visionary scientists believed—until the 20th century—in the reality of the ether, an insubstantial matter that was necessary – even though undefined – to support the early theories of the way light traveled through space. There is no such thing as ether, but the word has stuck. Those who see themselves as broadcasters especially love the word. If one is a broadcaster, it is appalling to think that one’s messages, once they have bypassed all nearby galaxies, will simply disappear into blackness. The idea of the ether as a cushioning depository – a kind of transit lounge for wayward transmissions – is very appealing. I have often wondered why we find it so hard to imagine infinite nothing; it seems to me sometimes to be the most delightful concept. God, if you care to call Him that, generated the most apocalyptic disturbance when He—through His wistful boredom—felt the whim to create the first particle.

*And when the world began*

*I'd been asleep forever*

*I opened one eye*

*Guess then it was I*

*Got the whim to wake*

*Wake up and hear the music.*

*Wake up and hear the music play.*

Outside the Vox-Box Gabriel hears the sound of a noisy and joyful party. I can hear it too, but I can’t see any sign of it. It is a further annoyance. Gabriel is beginning to settle down now; he looks like a

man who would enjoy a good party.

‘We were three very special friends from different religious backgrounds.’

He speaks now as though certain he has made a connection with Josh.

‘There was me,’

He holds up a photograph of a smiling boy of about seven years old. I recognise him immediately. The picture was taken by me in 1969, when I myself was recently married, living nearby with my beautiful young wife and my own two growing kids, one daughter two years old, the other a new born baby. As a child Gabriel had shy good looks before the camera, and – here – his head tilting down so his dark brown eyes look up in an appeal to the lens, despite shyness, he gives the impression of tremendous strength. Indeed, everything begins to flood back: Gabriel had been strong. The fastest runner, a good wrestler, and mostly, generously loyal to his friends.

‘I could hear music.’

He looks at the photo of himself as a child and smiles. Then, turning his head to the camera – towards his old friend, who he seems certain is listening, or will hear him eventually – he breaks into a half laugh. But the levity does not reduce the force of his words. Gabriel, once upon a time, quite obviously really heard music.

‘You,’

He goes on.

‘You could hear voices.’

He flips the photograph he is holding up to the camera and replaces his own with one very similar. I recognise this fellow too of course. This is another of my photos, I often forget this was once a hobby of mine. And the image I see again evokes an almost neglected idea I once had of the power of male beauty. Josh, like Gabriel, at seven years old in the photo, is full of apparent health and humour, but Josh was beautiful.

Josh became a man who enjoyed that very special beauty that seemed to shine on those around him.

One never felt he was better than anyone else; he complemented his circle. And yet, standing alone, photographed alone, as a man in the early flush of maturity, his face was almost mesmerisingly perfect. There were many women, many men, who had seen Josh across a crowded room and demanded of themselves deep in their hearts that they must have him. But in that sense Josh was always a disappointment; for when they gave chase he quickly made them feel he belonged to them already. Like those wobbly souls who become adorable simply because they are capable of falling in love with almost anyone who shows them attention or demands their interest, Josh was apparently open, accepting, accessible, but it may have been an illusion. Hard to know, if smitten by this man Josh, and alone with him walking in a park, whether the experience of a perfect moment was something he fully shared.

And in the photo Gabriel holds, Josh's boyish face at seven years old betrays all of that romantic intrigue laying ahead. What it can't reveal is the quite astonishing racket he always heard inside his head.

'Leila,'

Gabriel twists comfortably on the stool in the Vox-Box and holds up another photograph.

'She could fly.'

The girl in the picture is nothing but an infant. Again, the photo triggers a rush of memories and detail that concentrates my mind, still afloat in the midst of euphoric space-time. A little under six years old she stares into the camera with a look of resentful wonder. Gabriel bounces the picture before the lens, not so much in an emulation of flight as an affectionate cradling. Gabriel moves and speaks slowly and deliberately; as though he has waited for this moment for a century. He runs his index finger in a circle around Leila's face. She has something of the look of a refugee, her clothes the ragbag collection of the Kashmiri tribes – a colourful and sari-like dress worn over a pair of tight trousers. Her ankles bundled in thick socks around which has been tied a pair of colourful scarves which disguise the laces of what look like boys' boots. Over this ensemble she wears a small, man's waistcoat in a careless Paisley print. Over all a knitted light green cardigan left unbuttoned with sleeves partly rolled up. If she had been photographed in the hills of Kashmir, surrounded by winter snow, she would have looked perfectly at home. She stands instead in a street in Acton. Acton, my home town.

'We grew up.'

Gabriel switches pictures again, this time the three of them are together as teenagers in 1983, posing, art students pretending to be rock stars.

'And formed a rock band. We became famous and powerful.'

This last word Gabriel speaks with affection and irony as he enunciates every word slowly, like a spoiled gourmand enjoying the first choice from a box of very expensive chocolates.

'We married, tortured and fought each other. In the process we showed the world the real truth behind what was called (among other things) rock 'n' roll. Together, we worked a miracle'.

I feel as if I too could say something about rock 'n' roll. Could I?

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Crunchy green lettuce leaves. Tuna fish crumbled into mayonnaise with chopped spring onions. Open textured white bread, probably Italian – tasting very slightly of olive oil. Cranberry juice – a natural antibiotic like garlic. Bottled water, chill to touch. Unsalted butter, cold from a fridge and solid, but soft enough to spread. A cafetière of coffee.

It has been enough to draw me down from the ether into my little room. Or is this a cell I inhabit? I have no concern over it; my possessions – such as they are, mainly various homeopathic remedies and old '50s cigarette cards bearing the faces of cricketers of the period – I keep in a pile of Old Holborn tobacco tins. There are about five on a small table that serves as a desk, several more on a single shelf on the wall. I once was a smoker. I was once been addicted to everything. Booze. Crack cocaine. Abused. Abuser. I know that what has happened to me in this life – food has brought me down to earth – has been meant to happen. I enjoy the simple lunch before me. At meal times I am content to be mortal, to *inhabit* my room and feel the sunshine on my face. Once I could only get out of it, out of myself. Now I can lose myself. There is a difference.

As I sip cranberry juice, I think about the three children. I myself had grown up in the same streets as they. A contemporary of their parents, I had become a good friend of Leila's father Damoo. What had

they called themselves, those three brilliant kids? It had been a clever name.

Gabriel's incredibly tortuous enunciations to Josh from up above invaded my reflective repast. The gentle, mortal hunger-pangs appeased, I find myself turning again to Gabriel's timeless broadcast. What was it he had said? He had said he had heard music.

*And when the weight of space*

*Rolled like it was an ocean*

*One became one*

*Father and son*

*Watched the sunrise break*

*And as the ocean warmed*

*And from this dream we woke*

*One sang to greet the dawn*

*One pursed his lips and spoke*

*I heard the heavens sing*

*Predicting Marty Robbins*

*I knew I'd find*

*Music and time*

*Were the perfect plan*

*I watched my son sail on*

*A little ship a-bobbin*

*I had to grow*

*Needed to know*

*Exactly who I am*

*Wake up and hear the music.*

I hear the bounce of a tennis ball outside the window. A child playing? It is bouncing against the wall of the neighbouring room. The calendar on my wall says the year is 2035. How old am I? Eighty? Ninety? Still can't seem to work it out.

*'I believe we will all be connected by a global grid of computers'*

I had once said. Had that been the roar of an enormous crowd, or simply the bored exhalation of the man sitting nearby who smoked too much?

*'I believe entertainment on this grid will be just like life.'*

A lecture theatre? In an art college. 1971? Or was it in 1985 when I ranted again? On both occasions I had stood on stage, my arms spread as I eagerly made my predictions. There were just a few people there. And, indeed, at the last event the man sitting nearby was bored enough to wheeze loudly, desperate for nicotine.

*'I believe that on this grid we will experience more lives than one in this lifetime.'*

No one was listening. Or at least, that is how it appeared.

*'I believe this could be a fucking nightmare.'*

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Now, in the winter of 2035, in the room next to that in which I enjoy my simple lunch, a couple are sitting with tea at a small table. Their room is much like my own, but it is full of books and what appear to be manuscripts, the result of an obsessive, prodigious and laboured manufacture. On every spare surface there are balanced precariously sheaves of paper covered in hand-writing, lines struck through, spattered with the experienced editor's various marks of correction and amendment, marks that appear incomprehensible to the uninitiated. The room's only window, like mine, is too high to provide a view. But the door of the room is open.

'So are you OK?'

The woman is about sixty, a striking and composed figure. Her grey hair and dark skin give her the air of a diplomat. She is obviously a devout Muslim, a dark shawl hangs over the back of her head. She could be a widow in mourning.

'You're free now at least, this place doesn't seem too bad.'

The man nods, expertly tossing his tennis ball against the wall and catching it without looking at it.

‘It’s fine, really,’ he gestures around him. ‘Better than the prison hospital.’

He continues to flick the ball back and forth. He is also in his sixties, darkly Jewish, especially handsome. His clear, dark eyes are perfectly spaced. His hair recedes, but his head is a perfect shape – not too square nor too oval. His skin has not dropped with gravity, and he has not been spared such jowels because of the preservative effect of constant smiling; his constant expression is one of amused and detached seriousness - what some might call *dead-pan*.

Leila — for it she —looks around her. Her heart pounds for a few seconds in that manner it might when one swigs coffee too quickly, or decides in a moment that one has fallen in love with someone who has passed in the street, and we will never see them again.

‘Josh, I know you’re not crazy. Not any more. Why don’t you just stop telling them that Gabriel speaks to you?’

‘But he speaks to me,’

He drops his feet solidly to the floor and looks into her eyes. Holding his tennis ball in two hands, like a child he smiles at her.

‘He comes to me, and he speaks to me.’

Leila holds out her hand and clutches Josh’s entwined fists.

‘And you know what?’ He laughs. ‘He sounds like Marlon Brando playing the Godfather, but English.’

I could have vouched for that.