

Chapter Nine - The 36 Dramatic Situations

With that dismissal of me, my grand thesis and my role in his life Damoo led the three through several rooms full of technical equipment both archaic and modern. One room which interested the children immediately contained a modern Ham radio; by its very nature an anachronism. But Damoo used the radio regularly to speak to a cousin in Iran. Leila showed the boys how it worked, and proudly nodded at her junior radio operator's license on the wall next to her father's. The boys were impressed.

‘On this radio at certain times we can speak to Iran. We can speak to Australia, even though it is directly underneath us,’ she explained.

She turned on the system. It emitted all the characteristic bumbings, mechanical *chunking* noises and static associated with short wave radio.

‘All this equipment,’ Damoo gestured vaguely, the sweep of his hand taking in the entire building. ‘Is for international communications. Entertainment mainly.’

‘So much wire!’ Gabriel was strangely unsettled by this place.

‘Ironic,’ said Damoo. ‘Wire will one day build a global communication system, but wire demands its own obsolescence. But today of course we still have a building full of wire for our internal networks’

‘..... and to link in the really cool old stuff like this radio,’ Leila cut in.

‘Most of our communications will one day be airborne. I am preparing a paper now about what I call the ‘New Ether’. Physicists at the end of the nineteenth century thought space was filled with something they had yet to discover and define. They called it ‘ether’. Even before the twentieth century arrived it seemed clear that no such material or medium existed. But recently we have found evidence that there may indeed be a material medium in space, which greatly affects the behaviour of particles and waves. This ‘New Ether’ exists on a different plane.....’

In my ether – *my ‘tired’, ‘old’, ‘anachronistic’ ether* – time straddles the past, the present and the

future. And though I am irritated at the way my erstwhile partner trots out my own precious theories as though they were common knowledge, I am secure in knowing the future direction of science. The New Ether will be discovered, but not until the twenty-first century. It will exist on

‘.....what cosmologists like Vilenkin and Garriga would call ‘O-regions’.

‘Parallel universes?’

‘Yes Josh, in a way.’

‘There’s more than one Josh? More than one Leila?’ Gabriel pretended to groan.

‘Possibly,’ Damoo raised and showed his calming, dismissive palm. ‘But that isn’t important. What is important is that on one of these planes, maybe only in an isolated case, space is perhaps full of matter of some kind. And it is this matter – and the energy its particles exert on neighbouring planes through its mere existence in parallel – that may help to explain not only why particles sometimes behave unpredictably in *this* plane, but also give us a clue as to what creation is intended to do. The discovery of New Ether could allow wireless communication just short of telekinesis: the transmission of matter’.

‘You’re talking about computers?’

Gabriel’s face darkened. His parents had passed on dire warnings about what would happen to society if entertainment – the old values – were to be subverted in any way by new technology. Gabriel’s instincts, even though he was young, aligned with them on the subject.

Damoo noticed the boy’s concern, but it was Leila who began to explain.

‘Dad says that, in the future, the entire world will be connected by computers. To begin with they will depend on wire and new fibre-optic cables, but also on satellites and radio signals. Entertainment, news, sport – even voting – will be carried over a vast network. Then, when computers get powerful enough, life itself will travel down the wire’

‘Or through the *New Ether*

Cochran.’

In the *Old Ether* the Vox-Box begins to throb and pulse with light.

‘Hey Josh.’

It is the old man who spoke again.

‘Do you know where I am now? Yup! It’s the same Vox-Box in the same studio. We loved to play, planning how we were going to change the world. It is many years later of course. Many, many years. But nothing much has changed – except that Damoo was right, they don’t use wire any more – not at all.’

The children were still children in 1975. Despite sexual awakenings, and the invasion of lust, eroticism and latent trauma, the boys at thirteen and Leila at eleven, still straddled that discomfiting, uneasy period of life we describe as puberty. The three were shuttled constantly between the two conditions of childhood and adolescence – finding serenity only when briefly settled in one or the other. But as soon as they were secure in their familiar roles as children, adolescence would call. And if, when it called – perhaps when the precocious Leila decided again to kiss impulsively first Josh then Gabriel, and brush her breasts against them, perhaps even touch their lower bodies with a careless knee – they responded, they would quickly feel like impostors and wish to return to more childish things.

In the boys’ shared play-garden there were, neatly arrayed in orderly rows on the ground, thousands of leaves.

‘If you use little leaves,’ explained Josh as he carefully lined up one of his infantry units.

‘These hard ones are perfect, and we pretend they are soldiers – you can have thousands.’

‘Better than toy soldiers,’ said Gabriel. ‘More of them.’

Leila saw the human units in a different role.

‘We could make a big rock festival.’

The boys looked at each with surprise. They’d never thought about playing such a game.

‘This,’ she went on, ‘is a big tower aerial. It connects everyone. All the people are trying to

get in for the big concert that connects them all together.’

Josh was immediately inspired, and tried to paraphrase some of Damoo’s future-shock.

‘Everyone is jumping out of their couch-potatoes and trying to get away from the programming.’

‘Music is banned,’ added Gabriel helpfully. ‘But not at the festival.’

‘Women are not allowed to go to the doctor.’

Leila was introducing the prohibitive thrust of Fundamental Islam.

‘What?’ Gabriel was confused.

‘In Islamabad.’ ‘Ur?’

‘We could do a play,’ she quickly changed tack.

‘Which one?’

‘Make it up.’

‘What would be the story?’

‘My dad’s got a book,’ said Leila. ‘*The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*’. She ran to fetch it.

‘What if we want to do a story that is not in the book?’ Josh grabbed the book.

‘Everything is here, every story. There are just thirty-six dramatic scenarios. In fact, there are even fewer really truthful stories – real life ones.’

‘Let me look,’ Gabriel moved to look over one of Josh’s shoulders while Leila took the other. ‘The first one is *Appeals for a refuge in which to die*. Wassat?’

‘No idea,’ admitted Josh. ‘But it might not mean real death.’ ‘What do you mean?’

‘My family follow Islam – you know that,’ Leila jumped in. ‘We don’t think of death quite like Christians.’

‘Or Jews?’

‘Let me look,’ Leila grabbed the book. ‘What about this – *A parent replaced upon a throne by his children*.’ ‘Wow,’

Gabriel may have less liked the idea of replacing his parents had he known they were presently on stage at some Northern Working Men’s Club, and were soon to appear at Batley Empire with a gaggle of conjurors and reformed ’60’s flower-power pop bands.

‘That sounds like a roman thing. *I Claudius* or something.’

‘Or this,’ Leila was flicking through the book rapidly. *Vengeance for Violation*.’

‘What’s violation?’ Gabriel darkened.

‘It means sexual abuse, rape.’ Josh was good on etymology.

‘Ah ...’

‘What about *A Hero Struggling Against A Power*?’

‘Your Dad, Leila, trying to pretend he’s Eddie Cochran.’ The boys giggle.

‘*Children Lost By Their Parents*.’

This struck a familiar note for Gabriel.

‘Child left at motorway café on the M1 as showbiz parents drive in their bus to play at Morecambe Pier.’

'The Innocent Despoiled by Those Who Should Protect Them.'

'Nice, light-hearted stuff isn't it?'

Leila was not to be impeded by Josh's schoolboy sarcasm.

'This is lighter ... *A Riddle to be Solved on Pain of Death.*'

'How to get a record in the charts?'

Gabriel was only half-joking, trying to get a look at the book which Leila had now completely commandeered.

'Disgrace Brought Upon Oneself Through Madness' 'It's not,' interjected Josh. 'A disgrace to be mad'

'Discovery That One Has Married One's Mother.' They all laughed.

'We did that at school, didn't we Josh?'

'Oedipus.'

'Slaying of a Mother Unrecognised.'

'Oh Damn it! I killed my mother. But it's not my fault. I thought she was Hitler.'

'Your mother hasn't got a moustache!'

'Only because she shaves.'

'This is a good one,' Leila was determined to keep the boys focussed. *'A Sister Slaying Through Professional Duty.'*

'Now that is definitely *my* mother,' laughed Josh. 'If anyone ever tried to marry her brother Hymie she'd kill them.'

‘My Aunt Tril fancies Hymie.’ What Gabriel said caused Josh to look at him in surprise.

‘My mother thinks he’s going to be Mayor of London. She wouldn’t let him marry Trilby ...’

‘Ah,’ Leila saw her chance. ‘But *we* could marry them.’